

Titian

Also known as

Vecellio, Tiziano

Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

BIOGRAPHY

One of the towering figures of Italian Renaissance art, Titian dominated painting in Venice from the death in 1516 of his probable master, Giovanni Bellini (Venetian, c. 1430/1435 - 1516), until his own death 60 years later. His long career is exceptionally well documented in his middle and later years, but contemporary evidence regarding his birthdate is contradictory, and major problems of dating and attribution still surround his earliest works. A key issue of his early career has traditionally been that of his relationship with his older contemporary Giorgione (Venetian, 1477/1478 - 1510). For much of the past century, art historians have been divided about whether a masterpiece, such as, for example, the *Concert champêtre* (Louvre, Paris), is a late work by Giorgione or an early work by Titian. Now, however, there is growing critical consensus that this and certain other Giorgionesque works are by the young Titian, by stylistic analogy with his earliest documented commission, the Life of Saint Anthony frescoes in the Scuola del Santo in Padua (1510–1511).

Thereafter, Titian's progress to artistic maturity and public prominence was rapid. In 1513, still in the lifetime of Giovanni Bellini, he secured the commission to paint a large canvas representing the Battle of Spoleto in the premier council chamber of the Venetian government in the Doge's Palace (not executed until 1537–1538; destroyed 1577). In 1518 he completed his huge-scale *Assunta* for the high altar of the church of the Frari (in situ). Further major altarpieces followed, including that for the patrician Pesaro family, likewise for the Frari (completed 1526; in situ), and the *Death of Saint Peter Martyr* for the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo (completed 1529; destroyed 1867; full-size copy in situ). Meanwhile, Titian came to the attention of a foreign prince, Alfonso d'Este, duke of Ferrara, for whom he painted a series of mythologies (1518–1523) in one of his private apartments, with subjects celebrating the pagan gods Bacchus and Venus. This commission also involved the reworking of Bellini's earlier contribution to the same cycle, *The Feast of the Gods*.

Titian remained based in Venice, and he never ceased working for Venetian patrons. But his success at Ferrara led in turn to a close involvement with other north Italian princes, notably Federigo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, and then in the 1530s Francesco Maria della Rovere, duke of Urbino. The increasingly international character of his career received a further boost in 1529, when Federigo introduced him to Emperor Charles V. Titian's highly productive relationship with the emperor culminated in visits to the imperial court at Augsburg in 1548 and 1551. In the meantime, the painter pursued equally advantageous contacts with the pope's grandson, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. In 1541–1542 he painted the portrait of the cardinal's younger brother Ranuccio, during a visit by the boy to Venice, and in 1545–1546 Titian visited the papal court in Rome. His most important patron of all was the emperor's son, King Philip II of Spain, the recipient of a high proportion of the greatest works painted during the last 25 years of the artist's life. These included another set of celebrated mythologies, including an earlier version of the *Venus and Adonis*, but also many religious pictures. After 1551, however, the painter made increasingly few journeys outside Venice, and his work for Philip no longer involved him in attendance at court.

Titian was a master of portraiture as much as of religious and mythological painting, and throughout his career he was much in demand in this field. The sitters of most of his early portraits, up to about 1520, remain anonymous, but thereafter they include some of the most powerful and influential personages of his day. As well as painting grandees, such as his princely patrons, the doge of Venice, the emperor, the pope, and various members of their families, he also portrayed eminent men of letters, such as his friend Pietro Aretino and Cardinal Pietro Bembo. He also painted a number of pictures of women in a portraitlike format, but it is often a matter of debate whether these are intended to be recognizable portraits of real persons, or generalized images of feminine beauty, inspired by a poetic or erotic ideal.

Another area of debate in Titian studies is the extent to which many of the pictures associated with his later career may be regarded as autograph. Sometimes he himself produced repetitions or variants of his most successful compositions. But more often, his extraordinary fame led to a public demand for his works that he could only satisfy by employing a number of assistants to produce replicas and variants after his designs. Such works are sometimes of manifestly inferior quality, but often, too, Titian's involvement in the initial and final stages of a shop production makes it difficult or impossible to draw a clear line between autograph

and nonautograph. The technical procedures whereby his workshop produced replicas remain unclear, and it is sometimes supposed that he made small-scale oil sketches, in the manner of Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640) or Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (Venetian, 1696 - 1770), which would serve as the basis for repetition by his assistants. But there is no real evidence for this supposition, and it is more likely that his compositions were preserved in his shop in the form of large-scale but long-since-lost drawings, or that a full-size painted version was retained for some years in the workshop. It is noteworthy, in any case, that technical examination has revealed that not only works by Titian himself, but also those ascribable to his collaborators or followers, show extensive pentimenti, or departures from the original design. The problem of assessing the extent of the master's contribution to works painted in Titian's late style is further compounded by the fact that when he died he left in his studio a large number of works in a more or less unfinished state, which his former assistants then completed in a way that they thought would make them easier to sell.

Titian has always been regarded, from within his own lifetime and in subsequent centuries, as the supreme master of color. His colors are characteristically warm and rich, thanks in part to the high quality of his pigments, but even more to his ability to exploit the oil medium to give them depth and intensity and to soften and blend the edges of forms. Closely linked to this was his pioneering exploitation of the canvas support to endow his paintings with an expressively uneven texture while also using varying brushwork, with the result that some areas are thickly impastoed while others are thin and sketchy. His pictorial technique is highly evocative, both of sensuous surfaces, such as soft female skin, and of poetic mood. Typically, as revealed by x-radiography and infrared reflectography, he would prepare his paintings with only the sketchiest of underdrawings, made with the tip of a brush, and then evolve his compositions freely and spontaneously, making frequent and sometimes radical revisions. Many of these characteristics are evident in his art at the outset, but during the course of his career they became more pronounced, as his handling of paint became broader and looser and color planes became more fragmented. Virtually all of the leading painters of the 17th century, most especially Rubens, Sir Anthony van Dyck (Flemish, 1599 - 1641), and Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1599 - 1660), but also some of those working in a different tradition, such as Nicolas Poussin (French, 1594 - 1665) and Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669), were deeply indebted to Titian's example.

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